



"So you were at home watching me! Well, you have seen, haven't you?"

# The Empty House

By Maurice Level

Illustrated by Harry Townsend

**W**HEN he had picked the lock, the man went in, shut the door carefully and stood listening intently. Although he knew the house was empty, the complete silence and inky darkness made an extraordinary impression on him. Never before had he experienced at one and the same time such a longing for and fear of solitude. He stretched out his hand, felt about the wall, and fastened the bolt of the door. A little reassured, he took from his pocket a small electric lamp and looked round. The white patches of light that broke the darkness moved up and down with the beating of his heart. To give himself courage he murmured:

"It's like being in my own house."

Forcing a smile, he stepped cautiously into the dining-room.

**E**VERYTHING was in the most scrupulous order. Four chairs were pushed in around the table; the reflections of the legs of another were mirrored in the shining parquet floor. Vague odors of tobacco and fruit floated in the air. He opened the drawers of a sideboard where table-silver stood in orderly piles. "That's better than nothing," he thought as he put it in his pocket. But at every movement the spoons and forks jingled, and though he knew that the house was empty and he could not disturb anyone, the noise agitated him and he turned away on tiptoe, leaving untouched a case of silver and enamel fruit knives and forks.

"That's not what I have come to get," was what he said to himself to excuse his hesitation.

But the same want of resolution kept him standing at the door of the little salon where the closely drawn, heavy curtains made the darkness still more dense. He made a supreme effort to dominate this unusual cowardice; and finally he walked calmly into the room with the easy step of a man who is returning to his own home after an evening with friends. He had suddenly lost the sensation of fear, and, seeing a candelabrum on an old chest, he struck a match, lighted the candles, and carried the light around to examine the pictures on the walls, the gold photograph frames, the ornaments, the piano, the mantelpiece from beneath which there came the smell of cinders and soot. He glanced at some papers that he raised with a finger, weighed a silver statuette in his hand and put it down again, then with a last look round the room, placed the candelabrum on the table, blew out the candles and opened the door of the bedroom.

**T**HERE was no longer any shadow of hesitation. Under pretext of looking over the house, which was to let, he had some days before been able to find out where every piece of furniture stood, and its nature. At one glance his practiced eye had noted the bureau where the old man was sure to keep his valuable documents, the chest where his money ought to be, the bed in the alcove, and the big wardrobe with glass doors and many drawers, the contents of which he would probably find it well worth while

to examine. He put out his lamp, stretched his arm and, without knocking again, even a chair, walked towards the bureau. He felt the top, drew his hand along the front, placed one finger of the left hand on the lock and felt in his pocket for his keys.

He had lost a little of his calm. It was not that he had any return of the curious fear of the darkness and silence of the house he had broken into; he only felt the feverish haste of the gambler who finds his card before turning it up. What would he find . . . Title deeds? . . . Bank notes? . . . And how much? What fortune lay waiting for him behind this plank of wood?

**B**UT he could not get at his keys. He had forgotten to take them out of his pocket before putting in the silver, and they had become entangled in it. As he fumbled, the spoons got into the mesh of the keys, the prongs of the forks bent and pierced the lining of his coat, scratching his flesh. His impatience increased his clumsiness; he stamped his foot, swore, clenched his teeth, and pulled so violently that the stuff gave way, and the keys and silver fell out and scattered over the floor with a sound like that of old iron. . . . He was losing his nerve again. He had so nearly attained his object, and time was flying! . . . He did not know the exact hour, and seemed as if he had been there a very long time. For the first time he became aware of the tick-tock of a clock, and the minutes seemed to be galloping along.

He knelt down, took a key and tried it, his face close to the lock; no use. He took another, then a third, and still another, trying (Continued on page 2)

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And all the time—instead of an unmarried girl, with the experiences of love and marriage before her—she had been already married, and divorced! Another man had loved and possessed her.

"What's the good of going into it!" she said at last desperately. "You can guess—what it means—a sudden crimson rushed to her cheeks—"to be tied to a man—without honor—or principle—or refinement—who presently seemed to me vile all through—in what he said—or what he did."

"I can show you the report."

There was silence. Ellesborough turned round, put his hands on the mantelpiece, and buried his face on them. Presently she threw back her head proudly. Her eyes were full of tears. Then she rose impetuously.

"There! I've told you. I suppose you don't want to be friends with me any more. It was rotten of me, I know, for, of course—I saw—you seemed to be getting to care for me. I told Janet when we set up work together that I wasn't a bad woman. And I'm not. But I'm weak. You'd better not trust me. And besides—I fell into the mud—and I expect it sticks to me still!"

She spoke with passionate animation—almost fierceness. While through her inner mind there ran the thought: "I've told him—I've told him! If he doesn't understand, it's not my fault. I'll say, 'I did tell you—about Roger—and the rest!—as much as I was bound to tell you.' Why should I make him miserable—and destroy my own chances with him for nothing?"

They stood facing each other. Over the fine bronzed face of the forester there ran a ripple of profound emotion—nostril and lip—and eye. Then she found herself in his arms—with no power to resist or free herself. Two or three deep, involuntary sobs—sobs of excitement—shook her, as she felt his kisses on her cheek.

"Darling! I'll try and make up to you—for all you've suffered. Poor child! Poor little Rachel!"

She clung to him, a great wave of passion sweeping through her also. She thought: "Now I shall be happy! And I shall make him happy, too. Of course I shall! I'm doing quite right."

**BUT** Rachel, haunted by her sense of guilt and by the knowledge that, if she marries Ellesborough without telling him the whole truth, she must throughout all their life together continue to deceive him, is wretchedly unhappy. And to this unhappiness is added, one day, the horrid fear that Ellesborough may hear the story of Dick Tanner, from other lips than hers. For Roger Delane—her divorced husband—knows it and, coming to Great End Farm to blackmail Rachel, goes off with a large sum of her money, leaving her terrified by his threats of violence, and revenge. And so, in her hour of need, she turns to Janet with her trouble.

"I KNOW you can't understand me, Janet," said Rachel, after a pause. "you could never do what I've done. I dare say when you've let me tell you the story you'll not be able to forgive me. You'll think I ought never to have let you settle with me—that I told a lie when I said I wasn't a bad woman—that I've disgraced you. I hope you won't. That—that would about finish it." Her voice shook.

"I didn't love Dick Tanner," said Rachel at last, her hands over her eyes. "I don't pretend I did. I liked him—I was awfully

sorry for him—as he was for me. But—well, there it is! I went over to his house. I honestly thought his sister was there; but, above all, I wanted him to sympathize with me—and pity me—because he knew everything. And she wasn't there—and I stayed three days and nights with him. Vain!"

"But yet I suppose it was in me all the time. I was always seeking—reaching out—to somebody I could love with every bit of me, soul and body—somebody I could follow—for I can't manage for myself—I'm not like you, Janet. And now I've found him—and—"

### BESIDES "HARVEST"—

"**HARVEST**," perhaps the most popular novel of the late Mrs. Humphry Ward, marks the end of the career of a great English novelist; "This Side of Paradise" (Scriven's)—also a best-seller—the debut of a very young American novelist, F. Scott Fitzgerald. These books, oftentimes superficial revelations of a young college man's career, are at all times vivid, readable, amusing. Of more serious interest is "The Power of a Lie" (Moffat, Yard), the latest novel of the great Norwegian writer, Johan Bajer. Here, paradoxically, a man guilty of a despicable treachery grows benign and expansive through his repeated efforts at self-justification—while the friend whom he has wronged succumbs to the corroding influence of self-pity. This is the novel for which the great Norwegian writer recently received the laurels of the French Academy. And Joseph Conrad's "The Rescue" (Doubleday, Page), another best-seller, is a real Conrad adventure story of the sea, in which a man, blundering into an impossible situation, is forced with an impossible choice—his career or the woman.

Every single one of these novels is richly worth reading—and of exceptional interest to whoever aims especially to keep abreast of the best in recent fiction.

She sank down again on the floor, kneeling, and put her hands on Janet's knees. "You see, Janet, don't you? You see?" It was the cry of a soul in anguish. "You poor, poor thing!"

"I'll tell him, it's done—forever. He'll forgive me, I think. He may be everything that's dear, and good, and kind"—her voice broke—"but it'd hit him dreadfully hard. A man like that can't forget such a thing. When I've once said it, I shall have changed everything between us. He must think—sometime—when he's alone—when I'm not there: 'It was Dick Tanner once—it will be someone else another time!' I shall have been pulled down from the place where he puts me now—even after he knows all about Roger and the divorce—pulled down for good and all—however much he may pity me—however good he may be to me. It will be love, perhaps—but another kind of love. He can't trust me again. No one could. And it's that I can't bear—I can't bear!"

**BUT** Rachel realizes that she can not go on without giving Ellesborough her complete confidence. So she writes him that night the whole story of her past and waits, next day, in agonized uncertainty for his reply. "If

nothing happens," she says, "I shall know what to think."

A BRIGHT fire which Janet had just made up was burning in the kitchen. Rachel brought in a few Christmas roses, from a border under the kitchen window, and arranged them in a glass on the table. It was the time to draw the blinds. But she could not make up her mind to shut out the soft sky, or the view of the road.

Something in the distance! An approaching figure, and the noise of a motor-bicycle. She caught at a chair a moment, as though to steady herself; and then she went to the window, and stood there watching. He was her quite plainly in the level light, and leaning his bicycle at the gate, he came toward her. There was no one in the yard, and before he entered he stood a moment, hat-headed, gazing at her, as she stood framed in the window. Everything that she wished to know was written in his face. A little smile broke the silence of the sitting-room.

Then he opened the doors and closed the behind him. Without a word she seemed to glide over the room toward him; and no she was on his breast, gathered close against the man's passionately beating heart. Neither spoke—neither was able to speak.

Then—suddenly—a crash of broken glass—a shot. The woman he was holding fell from Ellesborough's arms; he only caught her. Another shot—which gave his own coat.

"Rachel!"

It was a cry of horror. Her eyes were closing. But she still smiled at him, as he laid her on the floor, imploring her to speak. There was a stain of blood on the lips, as though there came a few shuddering gasps.

He sank down beside her, putting his arms to her lips. In vain. No sound was there. The smiling mouth had settled and shut.

"CAN you throw any light upon it, sir?" said the Superintendent, respectfully at last, when the doctor had finished his examination.

"Her husband did it," Ellesborough said quietly. "—the man who was her husband."

A shudder of surprise ran through the room. "Did I hear you right, sir?" said the Superintendent. "Miss Henderson passed is unmarried."

"She married a man called Roger Delane in Canada," said Ellesborough, in the same monotonous voice. "She divorced him—his cruelty and adultery—two years ago. A few days since, he waylaid her in the dusk and threatened her. I didn't know this! she wrote to me today. She said that she was afraid of him—that she thought he was mad—and I came over at once to see her. I could protect her. We were engaged to be married."

ELLESBOROUGH sat beside his dead love all night. The farm was peaceful again after that rush of the Furies through it, which had left this wreck behind Rachel's letter lay before him. The note it contained had gone very hard with him though never for one moment had he been in thought forsaken her. There was some comfort in that. But the memory which upheld him, which alone kept him from despair, was the memory of her face at the window, the sense still lingering in his physical pulses of her young clinging life in his arms, of the fluttering of her poor heart against his breast, the exquisite happiness of her kiss—the kiss which death cut short.

## The Empty House

(Continued from page 20)

the holder, shares that amounted to twenty thousand francs—a fortune!

"What a pity to leave them!" he thought. "But they're no use to me."

He replaced them. Sure now of his booty, he took his time, weighing the gold coins in his hand, comparing the surfaces and inscriptions on the forty- and fifty-franc pieces before putting them into his breast pocket. There was no longer any haste or agitation; success had ousted every feeling but relief and exultation. A heavy cart passed along the street, rattling the windows, shaking the furniture, making the silver on the floor vibrate. The sound brought him back to a sense of where he was, and he took out his watch. Four o'clock—it was growing late!

Gathering up the money without counting it, he looked quickly through the other drawers. There was nothing of any value to him. Some loose money had strayed among the papers and letters, and this he put in his vest pocket, murmuring: "For out-of-pocket expenses."

A BEAUTIFUL bronze paper-weight lay on the table. He had been wise enough to leave the share-certificates and some jewelry, but this—might he not take this as a charming little souvenir? . . . He was stretching out his hand when a noise startled him; the clock was striking, four sharp little strokes. He stood still, his hand on his fingers open.

The silence, broken for a moment by the decisive sounds, seemed suddenly to become

repressive, solemn. There was not a vibration within the four walls, not even the imperceptible murmur of hangings when the folds stir, not a creak from the dry boards that seem to sleep by day and wake into a sort of attempt at life during the night. . . . Nothing but the beating of his own pulses, the sound of the quickened tide of the blood that thrashed in his temples. . . . Fear gripped him again, a stupid, unusual fear—surely there was something abnormal about the nature of this silence? Why did he feel that he dare not disturb it by even a gesture?

He had ceased pressing the button of his lamp and stood there in the darkness, his shoulders bent, his neck stretched forwards, his nostrils dilated, his ears straining as he bent towards the mantelshelf where the little clock had ticked so quickly. . . . The ticking had ceased! Well, the clock had stopped, that was all. Was there anything terrifying about that? . . . Nevertheless, a shiver ran down his back; some immediate and terrible danger seemed to be threatening him, and he seized his knife, turned on the lamp, and wheeled quickly round.

IN THE alcove, half hidden in the shadow, he saw the face of an old man. The mouth was half open, and two terrible eyes were looking fixedly at him. There was no expression of fear; the eyes looked unflinchingly into his own; the hand that was stretched out over the sheet did not tremble; the leg that hung down below the covering was steady. Someone was going to take him by the throat; in a moment he would feel on his face the breath of this pale and silent adversary.

Without daring to move his head, he turned his eyes to look for the door. The bank notes had fallen to the floor, forgotten; he had but one idea—to flee! But from the menace in the eyes he saw that he would never manage to reach the door, that the old man was opening his mouth to cry for help, and that once the cry had sounded, it would be too late to escape; and without a second's hesitation, like a beast defending itself, he rushed to the bed, raised the knife, and with a gasp of rage thrust it twice into the body up to the hilt. There was no moan, not a sound; a pillow fell softly to the floor and the head slipped sideways on the bolster, the lips half open, the chin on the chest.

STILL trembling with fear and passion, he drew back and looked at his victim. The light of the lamp was too small to allow him to distinguish either the rent made by the knife in the disordered shirt or any trace of blood. Apparently the stroke had gone straight to the heart, for the expression of the face had not changed. The first

thrust, well aimed and lightning swift, had stopped life as if it had been a shot from a revolver. Proud of his skill, he muttered menacingly:

"So you were at home watching me! Well, you have seen, haven't you?"

But as he bent over the quiet face and noted that the expression was the same, it flashed into his mind that the knife might only have pierced the coverings, that perhaps the old man was still alive, still watching him with the same supreme irony.

He raised the knife again and drove it in, drew it out and brought it down with savage frenzy; and, intoxicated by the dull sound it made as it entered the chest, he continued to strike, exciting himself by oaths and exclamations that he forgot to stifle. The shirt was now in rags, the flesh one large wound. But, untouched by the knife, the face still kept its impassive calm, its terrifying stare. He lost his head and, flinging his lamp away, seized the old man by the throat to give a last certain stroke.

BUT his right hand remained up in the air and the cry of rage did not pass his lips, for under the other hand he felt, not the damp and throbbing flesh from which life was escaping in a flow of blood, but flesh that had no last quiver of life in it, which was cold with the awful iciness that is like nothing else in the world—dead flesh, dead for long hours! . . . His arm fell.

He had never been afraid of crime. His knife had often been red; his face had been wet with the warm stream that leaped from severed arteries; he knew the smell of blood, the death-rattle that comes when life is flowing from the body. . . . Death caused by his own hands was nothing. But this!

And instinctive respect for the dead suddenly rose from some obscure depth in his murderer's soul, and a superstitious fear of the Great Mystery froze him. . . . He had believed the house was empty, and he had shut himself in with a corpse! . . . A corpse! . . . This, then, accounted for the unearthly silence and the pall-like mystery of the darkness! . . .

SOMEWHERE in the far distance a clock struck five, and without daring to turn his head towards the abandoned spoils, with his hat in his hand and vague memories of prayers rising in his terrified mind, he stumbled over the furniture and fled from the house.

IN the face of their great temptation—they hesitated. Watch for "When the Cuckoo Crows"—by Johan Bojer, the great Norwegian writer—which will appear in *Hearst's* for October.

## I Get Along with People

(Concluded from page 36)

homes, apartments and hotels, and boarding-houses, with the ancient instinct to have a home of their own constantly urging them, nourishing a sentiment that manifests itself in many ways.

They are satisfied exiles, far from their native heath. And the tremendous competition of so many persons has quickened their minds. Quick minds as a rule have quick sympathies, so they respond alertly to a sentimental appeal. Their very sophistication makes them sentimental. They are the greatest audience in America.

Their songs have a vague, half ragtime, half sentimental atmosphere—as, for instance, "Down the Long, Long Trail," played by the best symphony orchestra.

Chicago is to me a city of many hoboes. Not all hoboes, mark you, but many. I enjoy my stay and shock my helpers by walking a great deal with hoboes while in Chicago. Hoboes are extremely human in that they like an audience. When they get someone to listen to them they radiate. For a quarter I saw three of the greatest actors I have ever seen. It was done by a hobo. I listened to his story and gave him a quarter. How he smiled and laughed and acted for that quarter! I followed him and saw him accost others and do as fine acting for them as he had done for me.

In your plans for life don't overlook the small-town community. The small communities seem to me to make up America. They are mentally and spiritually starving. They are avid for the new. Consider whether you can not give it to them. It is by no means unwise to start your career in a small town

and make it the training ground for wider activities.

The farmer driving to town from his rough farm in the yet undeveloped parts of the West has taught me much about human nature. The wise one drives along the road made by many wheels until the rut becomes too deep. Then he shouts, "Whoa!" and "Get up!" and to the surprise of his team starts a new track on the road. But you see a fool farmer driving along until his wagon wheels are nearly lost in the rut and his wagon bed scrapes along on the ground between them. He is lazy and stupid. There are many ways of making new paths. The first is to get your mind wagon out of the old ruts. Make a new road for your thought.

I CAN not finish what I have set down about my little discoveries in human nature without saying something about women. The business woman becomes in outlook and mental processes like a man. She should be approached in the same way. I know no difference between them.

But one who lives and looks upon life must learn something of the other kind of woman. I mean the home-keeping woman. The greatest business of a woman is love. If such a woman studied a man as the man does his work she could hold any man all his life.

To hold a man in lifelong grip a woman must keep some of herself in reserve, so that a man kisses her with something of awe. He must feel that there is an interesting stranger in the house. He must never feel sure that he possesses her. She must seem to him never unfaithful, but always inscrutable.

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